

Living Up to Our Values

by Mary James

Two years ago, Chad Speight of Chad's Carpentry in Monona, Wisconsin, tweaked his company's routine. He called in a home performance consultant to analyze a house in which he was slated to start a remodeling project. In Wisconsin, qualified home performance consultants pretest a home to address customer concerns; at a minimum, all evaluations include testing for air leakage and combustion safety problems (see "Wisconsin's Home Performance Consultants"). A consultant also posttests a home after the remodeling or construction work is finished. Home performance consultants are certified under the auspices of the Home Performance with Energy Star (HPwES) program and Wisconsin's Focus on Energy program.

"We want to pursue sustainable, energy-efficient, and healthy home options while remodeling, and the Home Performance home analysis is a powerful tool that helps us achieve these goals with our clients, staff, and subcontractors," says Speight. Speight's company specializes in remodeling and restoration work, especially on older homes. Half of



Chad Speight, far left, appears with most of his staff at Chad's Carpentry; they take great pride in providing home performance service.

the homes he works on were built before 1950. The initial home performance consultation helps Speight to better understand the homes he works on and their problems—a goal

that Speight has striven for since he founded the company in 1992. The posttest provides a little extra incentive to all of his employees and subcontractors to get the details right.

Wisconsin's Home Performance Consultants

In Wisconsin, qualified home performance consultants conduct evaluations of a home's performance. The consultant's overall scope of work and the evaluation process can vary widely from home to home, depending on the customer's primary concern. A consultant's customer may be an insulator, a remodeler, or an HVAC contractor, or it may be a homeowner. Homeowners become interested in the program for a variety of reasons; they might have concerns about indoor air quality, energy savings, comfort, combustion safety, or house durability. As of last October, Wisconsin had 41 qualified consultants practicing.

Whatever the reason for calling in a consultant, all home performance evaluations include blower door testing to locate air leakage sites, combustion appliance draft and CO testing, and ventilation equipment testing (bath fan flows), along with a general inspection of the building shell, insulation levels, and HVAC equipment. Regardless of the type of work conducted on the home, all Home Performance with Energy Star projects also undergo complete posttesting that includes all of the initial tests plus an inspection of the completed work.

Becoming a qualified home performance consultant requires attending rater training and a period of on-the-job supervision; a

series of at least five mentoring visits are required before a consultant can work independently. Wisconsin Energy Conservation Corporation (WECC) is a certified Home Energy Rating training provider and has been operating a home energy rating program in Wisconsin since 1996, a few years before the Home Performance with Energy Star program started there.

For more information:

For more information on the program and on home performance consultants, visit Wisconsin's Focus on Energy Web site at www.focusonenergy.com.

"Everyone understands that their work will be subjected to testing at the end of the project, which helps to raise the bar of performance," says Speight.

In addition to altering his company's work routine, Speight's association with the Home Performance program has changed his marketing tactics and gener-



CHAD'S CARPENTRY

Chad's Carpentry promotes their affiliation with Home Performance Energy Star in all of their advertising. The project in the above photo, which was featured in their most recent ad, involved 2 bathrooms, the kitchen, a screen porch addition, and all new windows and exterior siding; the water heater was converted to an on-demand unit, and thorough insulating and air-sealing were performed as part of the Home Performance evaluation process.

Ever since that first consultation, Speight has been calling in a consultant for every job that involves more than \$2,000 worth of work or that affects the house's envelope. About three jobs a month fall into one of these categories. Although Speight doesn't think he would ever have made grievous errors on a project without the home performance evaluation, what makes the consultation a worthwhile investment for him is that it contributes additional expertise to each job. "It brings in another set of eyes to look at issues that might need attention beyond the original scope of work," says Speight. The consultant's initial report also gives Speight a credible record of problems that a customer might choose to address—or not. Finally, the testing-out process, which includes another blower door test to document changes in a home's air leakage rates, gives Speight a way to show the client the impact of the work that's been done.

ates new referrals on a regular basis. "We market the program on all of our yard signs, our newer trucks, our brochures, and most of our contracts," says Speight. "The program gives credibility, and some actual scientific clout, to the issues we care about; so in a real way, Home Performance allows us to promote our values more effectively and to live up to our values more consistently on each job." In exchange for agreeing to get at least four projects evaluated by a consultant each year, Speight gets accorded the status of a Wisconsin HPwES partner. As a partner, he is granted access to co-op advertising dollars—the program pays for a portion of his advertising costs—and he gets listed on the program's Web site as a participating contractor. The Web site listing generates several leads each month for Speight. He also receives referrals from the program office in Madison, Wisconsin. In addition, several calls each month come from customers attracted by the program's logo in Speight's marketing materials.

Although almost all HVAC contractors in Wisconsin participate in the program, Speight says remodeling contractors rarely sign on—a somewhat surprising turn of events for him, but he is grateful for the lack of competition. "I guess a lot of contractors are intimidated," speculates Speight. "They don't want someone passing judgment on their work, but I see that as a value."

Calling in an outside consultant has its value, and it also has its costs; consultants set their own fees, which tend to range from \$300 to \$400 per evaluation. Speight receives a \$75 rebate from the program upon completion of the posttesting. For the most part, Speight includes this fee as a part of his overhead costs and doesn't give the homeowner the choice of foregoing the testing. "It's part of our commitment to quality," he says. Speight makes an exception for small jobs that might affect air flow, such as installing a high-efficiency bathroom fan. "Since it's only a \$500-\$600 job, I will budget it separately," says Speight, "and the homeowner could choose not to do it."

Not that he could imagine actually wanting to refuse that service. In fact, he is so appreciative of the value of a home performance evaluation that he would consider bringing that service in-house if the program were to dwindle. However, he prefers having an independent party as a second set of eyes. In the real world, preferences sometimes have to give way to practicality; the most qualified home performance consultant in Speight's area is his insulation subcontractor. "Our insulation subcontractor is in the business of doing focused home performance work," says Speight. He is very experienced at working on older homes—Speight's core business—and he has one other key characteristic. "He's reliable," says Speight. Reliable expertise is a difficult quality to duplicate, which is why Speight now calls on this home performance consultant to conduct all of the evaluations he requires. And with the support of the Home Performance program, reliable expertise is what Speight delivers to all of his customers.



Mary James is the publisher of *Home Energy*.

Cutting-Edge Construction

by Mary James

Shannon Balts and her husband, Kevin Balts, of Balts Construction of the Chippewa Valley, in Wisconsin, pride themselves on running a family-friendly company that is open to new ideas. When a flyer from the state's Home Performance with Energy Star (HPwES) program arrived offering training in energy-efficient construction practices, Shannon picked up the phone. "We were looking for ways to do our jobs better," says Shannon, president of Balts Construction. The flyer mentioned techniques for making homes more efficient, more durable, and safer—all qualities that Shannon feels ought to be true of any family's home, especially any home her company works on. What she couldn't foresee was the large effect that the one phone call would have on her company's trajectory.

Three years ago, Shannon and Kevin, and two of their four employees, participated in a two-day on-site training session that covered building science and house-as-a-system construction techniques. The training also covered marketing tactics. The association with HPwES gave a big boost to a small company that was just beginning to make a name for itself. After the training, Dave Hepfler, a HPwES home performance consultant, would periodically refer jobs to Balts Construction. These referrals were mostly insulation installations, but those jobs would often turn into larger projects as Shannon and Kevin talked with the clients about their homes' problems.

Beyond these referrals, the training changed how Balts Construction responded to its own calls from prospective customers. Ever since, for every remodeling job with an estimate of at least \$2,000, the company now calls in one of the state's qualified home performance consultants, such as Hepfler, to conduct an evaluation of



Kevin Balts demonstrates how to air seal around a new window.

the home. The evaluation consists of pre- and postconstruction testing that includes blower door checks for air leakage, combustion appliance safety checks, and basic air distribution checks. "These tests help us to avoid liability problems," says Shannon. "If we do the job right up front, we know we're safer." The testing also adds to their understanding of a house's problems, and of the best ways to fix them. "We know the building science behind what we do," Shannon and Kevin were so pleased with the first training that they signed their whole company up for a second in-house session last winter.

The Baltses aren't shy about using the expertise they've gained as a way of distinguishing their company from the competition. "I use the fact that we hire consultants in my marketing pieces," says Shannon. She also uses the Home Performance with Energy Star logo in all of her publicity. Their full-time sales employee emphasizes whole-

house education in her dealings with potential customers, as does Shannon. "Just last week, a new client called to get a bid on a new roof, because he was having problems with ice dams. I figured out he needed air sealing." Clients may call asking for bids on new windows, thinking these will lead to huge cuts in their energy bills. "We try to educate them so that they're buying the right things," says Shannon.

Another outlet for client education is the couple's weekly radio talk-show. Every Wednesday they host a 20-minute segment on the radio, during which they discuss home performance problems, usually ones that they've recently treated. Listeners can call in with questions, although that doesn't always happen. Sometimes the Baltses invite manufacturers to share the time—and the cost—of airing the show. The talk show format has generated a positive response back at the company, unlike the radio ads that they had run previously. "We get three to



BALTS CONSTRUCTION

Shannon and Kevin Balts, along with Bruce Butler, a radio personality at WAYY am790, host a weekly talk show about home improvement.



BALTS CONSTRUCTION

Shannon Balts displays some of the energy saving materials that they use in their home improvement business.

four calls a week from the radio show," says Shannon. In early September they held an open house at their new home, which they are building for themselves, and about 50 listeners stopped in.

From a company that was just four guys and a truck three years ago, Balts Construction has now grown

to employ 15 people full time, including roofing, insulation, rough-up construction, and finish construction specialists. At any one time, the company is working on three to four jobs, ranging in size from one-day to multiweek projects.

Even with all that in-house expertise, the Baltses are not interested in bringing the home performance consultant's expertise in-house. "If I were a client," says Shannon, "I would prefer knowing that the consultant didn't have a vested interest in the posttest being right, or in changing the pretest to make more work." For the

Baltses, a third-party evaluator lends more credibility to the results. Expertise and credibility are strong platforms to grow a company on, as the steady expansion of Balts Construction of the Chippewa Valley shows.



Mary James is the publisher of *Home Energy*.

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